

Some thoughts on the future of Christian formation for children (and their parents)

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I had one of those conversations last week that's had me reflecting on our assumptions as clergy and churches, the way we do things, and what the future might look like.

A few weeks ago, a family visited the church I serve. We talked after the service and I learned that they hadn't attended church regularly in a very long time but that all of their children had been baptized and they were hoping to reconnect. Instead of encouraging them to sign the guestbook as I usually do, I gave them my business card and urged them to contact me. They e-mailed me a few days later and we set up a time to meet. In the course of our conversation, they asked about resources I might recommend to them that would help them teach their children about the Bible and Christianity. I told them to check out our Christian Formation program in the fall. We offer [Godly Play](#) for the younger kids and use [re:form](#) with our middle schoolers. The complication for them is that the family is active in athletics and have events scheduled almost every weekend.

I spent hours researching materials on the web and pretty much came up empty-handed. A plea for help to colleagues locally and to some folks whom I know are involved in Christian Formation nationally gave me some ideas. As I talked to people and as I reflected, it became clear that what I'm looking for is something that will help parents as well as children. While the couple who asked me directly had the guts to do so, I've had subtler similar requests from parents who are active at Grace Episcopal Church where I serve. Many of them are uncomfortable talking about their own faith and I suspect many of them aren't sure how to talk about faith with their children.

The church and clergy have all sorts of models of Christian education shaping our expectations. There's the traditional graded Sunday Schools that in a large church would go from toddlers to the aged, with everyone expected to attend every Sunday. There's the picture of the family at table sitting around as Father reads scripture to an attentive wife and children. Of course, both of those reflect particular

historical and cultural contexts. The Sunday School movement is a product of the 19th century; the image of a family reading scripture and praying also a Protestant model from a century earlier perhaps (it depends on literacy and the printing press).

There have been very different historical contexts in which Christian education was attempted and there were periods when the basic knowledge of most Christians was at best rudimentary. Protestant pastors in Germany complained in the 16th century that their parishioners didn't attend services or catechism classes and that they didn't know such basics as the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, or the Creed.

We're much closer to that latter historical context than to the idealized image of 20th-century churches with cradle to grave Sunday School. The difference between the sixteenth and the 21st century is that churches can't rely on the power of the state to enforce attendance or check religious knowledge.

And it's only going to get worse. One of my clearest memories of my last term of teaching undergraduates a few years ago was a student's question "Who were they?" after I mentioned Adam and Eve in an offhand comment. With increased secularization and the rise of the "nones," we can no longer assume that most people who come to our churches will have any basic understanding of Christianity or the Bible. And, as I learned over ten years of teaching Bible at a college in the South, even many evangelical Christians no longer read the Bible regularly or know its stories.

So my question is, What does Christian formation for children look like in this context? The following assumptions are given:

1. that attendance at services (let alone a second hour for formation) will be affected by all of the cultural changes that have occurred over the last 50 years,
2. that parents need tools to help them understand the Christian faith and the stories of the Bible as well as resources that will help them communicate those stories with their children,
3. and that the congregation will not be a primary locus for Christian formation (even if everyone, including parents, thinks it should be).

Below are the resources that have been recommended to me. I share them in hope that readers will add their own and that someone, somewhere, might have developed something that addresses the three assumptions I make above.

- [*Manna and Mercy*](#). This is the Bible in the form of a graphic novel. It's not geared toward any particular age group. Some churches use it with adult groups as well as with youth and children.
- [*The Jesus Storybook Bible*](#). One of my colleagues, who is the Episcopal chaplain at University of Wisconsin-Madison, used this book with students who wanted to learn more about scripture. In addition to the book, there are study guides and curricula.
- [*A Child's Guide to the Holy Eucharist*](#). This is published by an Episcopal publisher and is intended to help children understand what's going on in Sunday morning worship.
- [*The Discovery Series*](#). Some years ago the Episcopal Diocese of Texas produced this really good video introduction to the Episcopal Church.
- [*Father Matthew Presents*](#). This series of videos available on youtube explains briefly, and with some humor, the basics of our faith, scripture, and worship.

If you know of anything else that might be helpful, add it to the comments below.

Originally posted at [*Grieser's blog*](#)